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PEOPLE'S TEMPLE

The People's Temple is a religious cult organization that originated in the San Francisco area under the guidance of its "bishop", Jim Jones. Mr. Jones at one time was a prominent political figure in the Bay area, serving as the appointed chairman of the San Francisco Housing Authority. He still has many supporters in prominent positions in California, including the Lieutenant Governor, Mervyn Dymally.

The People's Temple purchased 23,000 acres of land in Guyana and, under a cloud of accusations of beatings, fraud and financial improprieties by former members moved the headquarters of the Temple to Jonestown, where they have established an agricultural commune. The Embassy presently estimates that there are 400-500 Americans, living and working at the People's Temple Agricultural Community. CA/SCS has received approximately twenty inquiries from concerned parents or other relatives of persons living at Jonestown. Richard McCoy, Consul at the Embassy, has made two trips in the past four months to investigate the charges that persons were being detained against their will or being mistreated. His personal observations and conversations with local officials who deal with the People's Temple have convinced him that no one is being held against his/her will or in bondage. The people at the Agricultural Community appeared healthy, well-fed and satisfied with their lives as agricultural workers.

The desk officer informs us that the Government of Guyana is sympathetic and supportive to the People's Temple as their commune (established in 1973) is very successful and is being used as an example by the local government.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDG/MR/R
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CHILD CUSTODY CASE: JOHN VICTOR STOEN

This case involves a dispute over the custody of John Victor Stoen, age 6, who is the legal son of two former members of the People's Temple. He was born while his parents were active members of the Temple. At one time, the mother signed power of attorney concerning John to a member of the People's Temple. Jim Jones showed papers to the desk officer and the DCM when they recently visited the commune which he states were signed by Mr. Stoen. One paper allegedly asks Mr. Jones to sire a child for Mr. Stoen. The other states that Jones is the father of the child. We note also that the Stoens effectively abandoned the child when they left the group. After leaving the group in 1976, Mrs. Stoen began court proceedings in 1977 to regain the custody of her son. Her husband joined her in these proceedings. After obtaining custody through the courts in California the legal process in Guyana was instituted last September. Hearings on the question of the validity of an arrest warrant for Jim Jones based upon his evasion of a habeus corpus order directing him to produce the child have been held periodically since September, the last hearing concluding January 10. Only after resolution of this dispute will the court turn to the actual custody question.

The case has created considerable public interest. Mr. Stoen has lobbied extensively with the Congress and to date SCS has received inquiries from 28 members of Congress. On the other side, the Guyanese desk and SCS have received in excess of 500 letters from members or supporters of the People's Temple. To the Congress, the general public and both parties, the Department and the Embassy have emphasized that the USG has no position on the merits of the case but is only concerned that the decision be reached fairly and impartially. To better assist us in monitoring the progress of the dispute, we have asked the Embassy to seek impartial legal advice regarding the procedural aspects of the case.

QUESTIONS TO RAISE

Based upon the progress of the dispute to date and the personalities involved, both SCS and the Guyana desk believe it likely that the court proceedings in Guyana will drag on for an indeterminate time. Furthermore, it is our private opinion that custody of John Victor very likely could be awarded to Jim Jones. Should there be a long delay or Jones be awarded the child, Mr. Stoen is certain to demand that the Department intervene with the Government of Guyana to force the return of his child. This demand undoubtedly will be accompanied by strong Congressional pressure on the Department.

In your conversations with Ambassador Burke, we recommend that you discuss fully the domestic consequences of such adverse results as opposed to the consequences in Guyana should the Stoens be granted custody. You should emphasize to the Ambassador that, failing clear proof of any outside interference with the decision of the courts, the USG will decline to intervene in behalf of either party.

SCS has recommended that the Embassy consider hiring independent counsel to monitor legal developments; the Embassy is reluctant to take this action (See Georgetown 851 and State 34403 and 41710). Embassy contacts with the government to obtain information are misinterpreted by Peoples Temple supporters in the United States as interference in the internal affairs of Guyana. However the Department supports the Embassy's efforts to obtain information from the government. Although the Embassy should continue to speak with both attorneys the Embassy should not rely upon the attorneys' beliefs as definitive concerning the procedures in the case.